

SHIFTING FOR YOURSELF

by

Gerri Traina

## SHIFTING FOR YOURSELF

It's not at all unusual to take a motor launch to your hotel in Venice. Or to fly from Madrid to Amsterdam by way of Nice. And your friends have already been bored with stories of Italian wolves (although I should warn them about that journalist who runs a travel agency in Sorrento). But have you ever tried to drive up the narrow, winding strip leading to the top of Vesuvius - on a foggy day?

I had been driving through Italy in a rented Fiat '600 for two weeks without running into anything more serious than a straying mountain goat. And I certainly was quite used to the grades and dips of northern Italian roads. No drive was so challenging as that from Genoa to Venice by way of Piacenza, Cremona, Brescia, Verona, Vicenza and Padua. Some people call these hills the southern extremities of the Alps. They certainly are extreme.

But, without question the most breathtaking place to miss a hairpin curve and sail out over the gorgeous promontories is somewhere along the one hundred seven kilometer (65-mile) stretch between Bologna and Florence. I've got the view captured on a marvelous double-exposure, superimposed



over a previous shot of the Doges Palace in Venice.

Don't ever drive alone if you can help it--hitch-hiking is not only accepted in most of Europe, it's encouraged. You see small groups of hostellers waving the flags of their countries to tempt the unwary driver, who then feels obliged to take the hosteler fifty kilometers out of his way to get him, her or them to the next hostel before 9 p.m. I've met hostellers who've missed their curfew by minutes, and were forced to keep both awake and alive (it was late fall) by walking around and around the outpost (many hostels are outposts, miles from humanity) to keep from freezing.

The two hundred and ninety kilometer (185-mile) drive from Florence to Rome was made so much more pleasant for me by Odetta Luz, a hitch-hiker whom I picked up on a quiet crossroads about a third of the way to Rome. She started speaking Italian, and I attempted to respond. Apparently startled at my distinctive accent, she asked, "Are you an American?" "Yes," I admitted courageously, so she explained that she spoke some English and was a Portugese movie columnist who was hitch-hiking on a dare. Not only did I learn about the private lives of European movie stars, and the private lives of American movie stars who have made pictures in Europe, but also the private life of Signorina Luz - and that would have made the best movie of all.



In gratitude for my generosity in picking her up, Signorina took me to a Roman opening-night of a new Italian comedy. After a look-around backstage, we sat amongst assorted minks and sables (I wore my good file coat) and laughed - well, it was slapstick and sight-gag comedy which must have been second-rate because I understood what was going on on stage despite the language barrier. All very delightful and spur of the moment - with reservations.

Signorina Luz disdained taxis. The eight-block walk from my hotel on the Via Nazionale to the theatre (one block from the Piazza Barberini) didn't bother me and I welcomed the walk. But the Signorina had on new shoes and the Portugese appear to be less inhibited than the Italians. Half-way to the theatre, she flagged down a car, commandeered it, told the two, charming gentlemen (she certainly knew how to pick cars) that her feet hurt, and directed them to the theatre. They obliged. I momentarily forgot that I was going to the theatre - the one in the back seat was so polite. That four-block ride went much too quickly.

Coming home was even more priceless. Still ignoring the hovering taxis, Signorina Luz proceeded to take off her shoes--and stockings--and walk barefooted totally unconcerned down the Rue Barberini, across Via Alessandro IV to the Via Nazionale, while I crept along a few steps behind, trying not to look like I was with her, coward that I am. So you see, picking up hitch-hikers can be most stimulating.



But I was going to tell you about Vesuvius. I had left sunny Naples on my way to Pompeii and decided matter-of-factly to drive up Vesuvius. Getting in or out of Naples traffic is no small feat, but I finally reached the foot and started up, winding around and around, and up and up - Naples was beginning to look like a reflection, an eye-blinding glint in the sun. I kept going up, beeping my horn at every curve (curves occur on Italian mountain roads at intervals of twenty feet; it is considered cowardly to use your brake on these curves, even if you suspect that a Fiat '2100 is bearing down on you in the other lane, so you beep your horn, and pray). I expected to see bits of lava beginning to coat the road. No lava. But with a sudden, unexpected poof, I was enveloped by a fetid, dirty grey sky of fog, which didn't choke me but made it impossible to see two feet in front of the 'brights', which were having no appreciable effect on the fogginess ahead. Did I give up gracefully? Not me. Stubbornly I inched ahead, leaning on the horn, not daring to think what would happen if I should meet a car on the way down - or a bus. So, onward and upward, and more fog...And then the fear began to take hold of me. Reasonable fear. Reasonable enough for me to have to admit that I never did get to the top of Vesuvius. When I came to a widening of the road by a deserted coffee bar, I turned around and crept down - slowly. I was never so happy to see that reflection of Naples in the sun.

Vesuvius? Wait 'till next year.



Driving in Europe is an experience with or without Vesuvius. I sometimes flew, went by ship, took a bus or train, depending on the circumstances - time, convenience or cost, but mainly to vary the types of people one meets on these assorted conveyances. When I began to be bored with German businessmen on planes; second-class <sup>train</sup> compartments overflowing with chattering Spanish families; seasick Irish making the Irish Sea crossing; and 'chartered' Americans going by bus from Genoa to Nice, I would rent a car.

Once you've mastered the four-shift drive in the Fiat, Volkswagen, Citroen or Sert, you can drive anything, anywhere, with maybe a few bruises. I love foreign cars, but straining the pectoral muscles and swaying from side to side to keep your machine from missing a precarious curve completely fills one's exercise quota for the day. And I'm not one to take the autostradas or thruways to get from one place to another. Oh no! You miss all the fun of having to slow down to two miles an hour to crawl through a town, pop. 401. These streets (I use that word advisedly) are not unused back roads. They're part of the main routes, second only to the thruways. But you'd never think that the townspeople had ever seen an automobile in their lives. They walk in the middle of the road and pay no attention to the little traffic that appears now and then. You're afraid to beep your horn for fear you'll scare them, but they know you're there. They'll step out of the way with barely seconds to spare and gaze curiously at the occupant, particularly savoring



the view of a young woman wearing sunglasses surrounded by luggage, driving alone. The comments were choice, or I think they were. The lips I couldn't read, but the eyes...! It was only when Odetta Luz was in the car that I learned what some of these comments were - unprintable here. She caused me a good deal of concern when she shouted right back - in tone and language decidedly unbecoming a woman.

I will say, though, the Italians deserve their reputation for appreciating music. Driving from Venice to Bologna I had another passenger - a young American engineer who was a fine baritone. With the help of some excellent red wine, we sang every popular song written since 1920 in full voice with the windows all the way down. We were rewarded with bravos and beatific smiles. After all, what can you expect from Americans? The gypsies on that trip weren't too friendly, however. I think they resented us using their encampment for a picnic lunch. We found the site different and picturesque, despite the fact that the car smelled of anchovies and cheese for several days thereafter.

The best time of day to drive in cities is undoubtedly at the siesta hour (s). Streets are deserted. If you should ever arrive in a city such as Dijon shortly before one o'clock in the afternoon, you might think to yourself, this isn't Paris, but where is everybody? Then, on the stroke of two (that's only in France; in Italy it's the stroke of three and in Spain, who knows?) the streets are again seething with



humanity making their way back to their shops, fulfilled - or at least filled. It's also the best time of day to park your car, otherwise you may never find a legal area, particularly in the big cities. In Rome, which is absolutely the worst to drive in, I got ~~two~~ two parking tickets during the week I kept my car carefully parked on a block with no 'verboten' signs. I thought the police should at least give me credit for parking neatly - European drivers never do. Usually they're sticking out fore or aft. By the way, if you ever rent a car, be sure to ask for the sticker that proclaims you're a foreigner. Put it in a very conspicuous place and while the carabinieri is making out the ticket, he'll ask you if you know his cousins in New York.

Another thing to remember about car rental is shifting. I thought I knew all about foreign cars after experience with the Volkswagen in Holland and the Fiat in Italy. But I still listened carefully when the gentleman explained the workings of the Citroen to me. He only forgot to mention one small detail - how to put the car in reverse! There I was, parked badly for once in front of my hotel in Marseilles, all set to start out for the Provencal countryside, when I discovered that I couldn't back the car out of the parking area I had wedged myself into. I tried everything, using every maneuver that had worked with the other models. Niente! So I sheepishly called the Mattei people and asked how to put the car in reverse. Have you ever tried to tell someone how to shift gears over a phone?



His instructions were useless when I got back to the car; I pushed and pulled a few more times, still without success. And then the Frenchman who had been parked in back of me came out to his car. I tapped him apologetically on the shoulder, gesturing to demonstrate my dilemma, while he stared at me, unbelieving. Reversing gears was really very simple. But I think that Frenchman is still scratching his head with wonder at female American drivers let loose on French soil who don't know how to reverse.

It's a pleasure to drive once you're out of the cities. One of the loveliest roads in France is from the aforementioned Marseilles to Nimes, by way of Aix-en-Provence and Avignon. Magnificent trees serve as stately columns as you enter the autumnal Provencal countryside. (In my snapshot, the view, taken through the windshield while driving on a rainy day, looks like a thriving X-ray). The changing colors are a veritable feast for the eyes, especially if you've been examining drafty, dark chapels and faded oil paintings for a month.

Unfortunately, it began to rain torrentially when I approached Avignon, setting the stage for a perfectly timed flat tire. To compound the effect of this catastrophe, I had come into the town shortly after 12 noon - everyone, mechanics included, was out to lunch. If you think my Italian is ragged, you should hear my French. After I walked several blocks to a garage, various commiserating Frenchmen listened dolefully while I tried to explain what was wrong.



Before I remembered the word for 'tire', my arm-waving descriptions must have convinced them that a very fat woman was expelling air from a bloated body. They just listened, until one of the most gallant Frenchmen I met on my whole trip offered to help. He pedalled his bicycle to where the car was leaning, and with me holding an umbrella over his head while the rains came, he proceeded to ~~change~~ change my tire. He wouldn't take one franc. Not only that, he tied up his bicycle, hopped into the car and directed me through the blinding weather to the Papal Palace for which Avignon is famous. That Frenchman evened the score against Paris.

Absolutely the worst drivers in Europe - excluding Americans - are chauffeurs in Spain and Neopolitans. The latter are only the worst (to me) because they have assumed from time immemorial that a horn is to be leaned on - constantly. You can't slow down in the middle of a Naples street for a clearly visible old lady without getting the horn. If you haven't started ahead before the light turns to green, you get the horn. Avoiding ruts (and they are numerous) is no excuse for slowly<sup>ing</sup> down. So you get the horn. Passing cars left or right is considered a marvelous sport, so if you don't, you get the horn. I recommend that Naples is a city in which an earplug is indispensable, for driver and pedestrian alike.



In Malaga, southern Spain, another hotel guest and I decided to rent a car for the day and drive up to Granada. I drove up and he drove back, and it would have been almost routine if it weren't the first time we had made such a trip - except for the chauffers. There must be a few more wealthy families in Andalusia than I was aware of. Because many of the cars we passed on the road were driven by chauffers - the slowest, middle-of-the-roaders that I have ever seen. If they knew you wanted to pass them, they speeded up, then fell back again gradually. Then speeded up again when you tried to overtake them, which is difficult on roads curving every twenty feet (those mountain roads are the same everywhere). It was almost as exasperating as driving in Amsterdam, where the cyclists swarm around you and make driving in the city a painful chore.

There is one bright note I might inject here. Driving in London is immeasurably safer - I think. I didn't drive there. I was terrified enough as a pedestrian looking the wrong way to ever think of renting a car.

###